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ABSTRACT

Many two-year and four-year colleges are facing the task of instructing students who are underprepared. In the field of speech communication the problem is compounded because some students are not only academically deficient but are also communicatively apprehensive. Several courses of action must be taken to help lessen the problem. Eighty-six percent of colleges provide special services for academically disadvantaged students. However, only 6.8% provide speech communication assistance, though 57% of speech communication departments indicated in a survey that such services should be offered. Self identification, standardized tests, specifically developed deficit testing tools, and interviews are used to identify students in need of assistance. Proposals for dealing with communicatively apprehensive students and lists of materials presently available to use in developing a help program conclude the document. (SRT)

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HOW CAN WE DEAL WITH THE UNDERPREPARED AND COMMUNICATIVE APPREHENSIVE ORAL COMMUNICATION STUDENT AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL?

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ABSTRACT

HOW CAN WE DEAL WITH THE UNDERPREPARED AND COMMUNICATIVE APPREHENSIVE ORAL COMMUNICATION STUDENT AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL?

Many colleges and universities are facing the task of instructing students who are underprepared. In the field of speech communication the problem is compounded because some students are not only academically deficient, but are communicatevly apprehensive. Certain individuals have both problems. This article examines the situation, investigates ways to identify the needy student, proposes approaches to be used for dealing with the deficient student, and lists materials presently available to use in developing a help-program.

A recent Brookings Institute study indicates that "more poorly prepared students enrolled in community college courses, reflects in higher education the decline of standards of the elementary and secondary schools. Community colleges are increasingly becoming centers for remedial education, attempting to overcome the failures of the lower levels and serving as a sort of dumping ground for less capable students who are unable to compete at other colleges and universities."[1] The problem is not only one confronting two-year colleges, but four-year institutions. These deficiencies are prevalent in all academic areas...reading, math, language skills, and oral communications.

The Communicative Deficient

For communication practitioners, the problem is compounded because there are differing views concerning the areas of deficiency. On one hand it is contended that students are deficient in such skills areas as structuring, organization of ideas, listening, the ability to ask and answer questions, giving directions and research abilities.[2] All of these skills are necessary to achieve in an academic environment and specifically in the basic oral communication course. Another group of theorists has centered specifically on the communicative apprehensive student.[3]

It is my contention that we are, in fact, dealing with three classifications of deficiency: the underprepared student, the communication apprehensive, and the student who has a combination

of both of these problems in varying degrees. Further, in dealing with these students, several rather than one course of action must be taken to help lessen the problem(s).

The underprepared student is one who cannot fulfill the minimum competencies as established by the Speech Communication Association's "Guidelines for Minimal Competencies in Speaking and Listening for High School Graduates."[4] They are not prepared to actually participate in and gain from a basic oral communication class nor do they possess the ability to fulfill basic oral communication requirements of their other academic courses (e.g., oral reports, group discussions, interviews, class participation). These students tend to have low high school grades, poor study habits, and are weakly motivated to be in or continue school. They often have unrealistic and ill-defined goals. They tend to have a minimum understanding of what college is for and what is involved. They don't know what to look for academically and what is involved in the educational process.[5]

The communicative apprehensive individual (often referred to as a "CA") is "one who is apprehensive about speaking in general or in particular situations."[7]

Some individuals are both underprepared and communicative apprehensive.

Accepting the fact that such students exist, three questions arise: (1) Should colleges and universities deal with these students? (2) If so, how do we identify these students?, and (3) What should be done after they have been identified?

Should Colleges and Universities Deal with Deficient Students?

If we assume that the purpose of our profession is to improve the communication skills of students then there is a commitment to provide access to improving these students' skills and to try and assist them to eliminate their communication apprehension. "It is the proper mission of the university to discover effective techniques for application of desensitization, skills training, cognitive restructuring, and or any other methodologies that appear promising."[8]

Presently, 86% of all colleges are providing some special service for academically disadvantaged students.[9] However, only 6.8% are providing specific speech communication assistance, through 57% of the speech communication departments, in a recent survey, indicated that such services should be offered.[10]

Identifying Needy Students

Assuming that it is the mission of speech communication programs to provide such services, how should we or can we go about identifying those in need of assistance? At present self identification, standardized tests, specifically developed deficit testing tools, and the interview, are being used.[11]

At some institutions students are told that help is available and they are given the opportunity to go into the appropriate help unit by their own election with no screening tools used. In other instances, students who volunteer, are screened by an interviewing process devised by the institution, or individual

instructors make recommendations for students to be interviewed as possible candidates for assistance programs.

Another approach is to make all incoming students take the SAT-Verbal test and use a cut-off point on that test for screening purposes. This may be of assistance in identifying skill-deficient students, but fails to screen the communicative apprehensive. To find these students the most commonly used tool is the PRCA (Personal Report on Communication Apprehension), which is reported to be the most reliable bench-mark of predictors for identifying the apprehensive communicator.[12]

Some institutions have developed instruments which test (a) the oral dimension (delivery, fluency, articulation/pronunciation, or grammar efficiency), (b) the written dimension (outlining, semantics, syntax), and (c) content analysis and organization (use of thesis statements, support material, transitions).[13]

Dealing With the Deficient Student

The next area of consideration centers on how to deal with the identified students. Students are presently being treated through special sections of the basic course, units in the basic course, and individual tutoring.[14]

One of the first decisions to make before selecting which of these methods to use centers on whether the institution will deal with skill deficiency and communicative apprehension as a single or multiple problem.

Research has indicated differences concerning the underprepared

and communicative apprehensive students:

..."Underprepared students tend to be less self-confident, show less interest in scholarly pursuits, have low tolerance for ambiguity and delayed gratification, and are more dependent upon authority figures."15

..."CA's tend to be low in assertiveness and responsiveness, are characterized as cool, independent, uncommunicative, disciplined, rational, hard-to-know, task oriented, and business-like."16

...There may be a correlation between intelligence and the underprepared student.17

"Although the CA and underprepared student apparently manifest similarities, the differences between the two seem to indicate different types of instructional alternatives." 18

It appears that the ideal solution is to offer students the opportunity to build skills when this is their problem, and develop communicative apprehension defenses and concept alterations, if this is the problem. Students with a combination of problems then could avail themselves of both learning opportunities. To aid a student to be less apprehensive, without teaching the necessary skills that he/she may be deficient in, is fool-hardy. Giving just skills to a fear-oriented individual also seems ridiculous.

Whether the assistance program takes the form of separate courses, special sections of the basic course, workshops/lab/groups as part of the basic course, developmental department offerings, or individual tutoring, depends upon the finances and philosophy

of the individual institution. It appears that the ideal situation would be to offer independent courses in both the area of skills development and coping with communication apprehension. In this way students can learn the basics needed for fulfilling both the communication requirements of the basic course, as well as overcoming the barriers that might cause academic difficulties with other course offerings. Most important, it would give the student the chance to be a more successful and productive member of society.

A skills oriented course/workshop for the underprepared should center on teaching (a) an understanding of such areas as feedback, communication breakdowns, and audience analysis; (b) the skills of listening, classroom participation, direction giving, describing and requesting, summarizing, asking and answering questions, and structuring a message, as well as; (c) selection of verbal and nonverbal symbols.[19] Topics covered in courses/workshops for the communicative apprehensive should include such areas as assertiveness, esteem building, communication performances, self-efficacy, controlled relaxation, covert rehearsal, and scripting.[20]

Teaching Materials Presently Available

One of the major areas confronted by those interested in developing such programs centers on the problem of limited number of teaching materials available in the field. Sources presently available include:

Roy Berko and Fran Bostwick, BASIC-ly COMMUNICATING: AN ACTIVITY APPROACH (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1983)

Lynne Kelly and Arden K. Watson, SPEAKING WITH CONFIDENCE AND SKILL (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

Gerald Phillips, HELP FOR SHY PEOPLE AND ANYONE ELSE WHO EVER FELT ILL AT EASE ON ENTERING A ROOM FULL OF STRANGERS (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981).

Virginia P. Richmond and James C. McCroskey, COMMUNICATION: APPREHENSION, AVOIDANCE, AND EFFECTIVENESS (Scottsdale, Arizona: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1985).

Barbara Strain and Pat Wysong, COMMUNICATION SKILLS (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1978)

Phillip Zimbardo, SHYNESS: WHAT IT IS, WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1977).

Phillip Zimbardo, THE SHYNESS WORKBOOK (New York: A and W Visual Library, 1979).

The Mission

We are specialists in the area of assisting individuals to become better or at least competent communicators. We have a commitment to provide access to improving the communication skills of the student. "Speech teachers do not have the training to treat clinical problems, but they have the experience to teach people with problems to communicate effectively."[22] A golden opportunity is being afforded our field to be of aid and assistance to a significant proportion of the population.

We cannot afford, as professionals, to overlook the underprepared and/or communicative apprehensive individuals.

NOTES

1. As reported in Probe, Lorain County Community College Faculty Development Newsletter, Lorain County Community College, Elyria, Ohio, January, 1982.
2. "The Less Competent Student and the Basic Course," a panel discussion chaired by Jim Dennison, Trenton State College, Trenton, New Jersey, at the Eastern Communication Association, Hartford, Connecticut, 1981.
3. An extensive discussion of communication apprehension is contained in Communication Education, Volume 31, #3, July, 1982.
4. "Guidelines for Minimal Competencies in Speaking and Listening for High School Graduates," Speech Communication Association, Annandale, Virginia.
5. A list compiled by Barbara Strain, San Antonio Community College, San Antonio, Texas, and presented during discussions concerning the underprepared student at several SCA conventions.
6. There are a variety of terms and definitions being used to describe the concept identified here as communication apprehension. For a complete discussion of these terms see: Lynne Kelly, Gerald Phillips and Bruce McKinney, "Reprise: Farewell Reticence, Good-by Apprehension! Building a Practical Nosology of Speech Communication Problems," Communication Education, Volume 31, #3, July, 1982, pp. 211-219
7. Gerald Phillips and James McCroskey, "Postscript," Communi-

cation Education, Volume 31, #3, July, 1982, p. 223.

8. Ibid.

9. Arden Watson, "An Exploratory Study of Relationships, of Characteristics, and Test Scores Among Communicative Apprehensive and Underprepared Students, a paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association, Hartford, Connecticut, May, 1982, p. 7,

10. Jan Hoffman and Jo Sprague, "A Survey of Reticence and Communication Apprehension Treatment Programs at U. S. Colleges and Universities," Communication Education, Volume 31, #3, July, 1982, p. 186.

11. Karen Foss, "Communication Apprehension: Resources for the Instructor," Communication Education, Volume 31, #3, July, 1982, pp. 196-197.

12. Michael R. Neer, "Enrolling Students in Communication Apprehension Laboratories, Communication Education, Volume 31, #3, July, 1982, p. 206.

13. Roy Berko, "How Can We Deal with Academically Deficient Oral Communication Student at the College Level?", a paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association, Hartford, Connecticut, May, 1982.

14. Foss, 1982, pp. 196-197.

15. Watson, 1982, p. 5.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Watson, 1982, pp. 15-16.

19. For a further explanation of this list and recommendations on how to teach these units see: Roy Berko and Fran Bostwick, BASIC-1y COMMUNICATING: AN ACTIVITY APPROACH (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1983) and its accompanying handbook.
20. Foss, 1982, pp. 196-197.
21. Gerald M. Phillips, "Coming of Age in the Academy," Communication Education, Volume 30, #3, July, 1982, p. 177.